

Millions of jobs and trillions of dollars have been taken out of our economy. Thousands of small businesses are holding on for dear life. Tens of millions of Americans are struggling with the rent, groceries, medicine, and utilities.

Only a week ago, the United States crossed the tragic milestone of half a million deaths from COVID-19, a stark reminder that the pandemic isn't done with us yet.

Over the past year, Congress has stepped up to the plate to pass important relief measures, but the job is not complete. The American Rescue Plan is designed to finish the job; to patch up the holes in our economy and lay a foundation for recovery; to keep struggling businesses, families, and workers afloat until brighter days appear on the horizon; to send our children back to school as quickly and safely as possible; and to defeat this evil disease once and for all.

That is what the American people sent us here to do. That is what our government is for—not to sit back and wait for problems to fix themselves, not to cross our fingers and hope the economy will recover on its own. Our job is to end, through action, the current state of the crisis and hasten the day when our country and all of our lives can return to normal.

The bottom line, if you look at the trajectory, every time we put in a relief bill—in March, the economy got better in June, and July. We put a relief bill in December, and now the numbers look a little better for January.

But the economy is not strong enough to sustain things on its own. We need strong relief to get the economy going so it can continue on an upward path on its own. That is what this bill is designed to do. I fear—most economists, Secretary Yellen, Chairman Powell—if we do too little or nothing, the economy could stay mired in recession for all too long a time, just as it did when we didn't do enough in 2009, and the economy stayed in recession for many years after the financial crisis.

VOTING RIGHTS

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, on voting rights, in our American system, we talk a lot about “perfecting our Union,” a reference to the preamble of the Constitution, a document which effectively gave only White male landowners the right to vote in our fledgling democracy. Suffice it to say, there is a lot of perfecting to do.

As I think about my Democratic caucus—incidentally, it is probably so that less than half of them could actually vote in the elections of 1789 because I believe in many States you had to be White, male, Protestant, a property owner—not so many of those around here.

Over the course of 230 years, we passed scores of laws and amended the Constitution to reflect the flaws in our

democracy and expand the franchise to all our citizens, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the 14th, 15th, 19th, 23rd, 24th, 26th amendments—just to name a few.

Despite all this progress, there is now, in the 21st century, a concerted effort to roll back voting rights in State legislatures across the country, alarmingly making it harder—harder—for Americans to vote and particularly aimed at Americans of color—African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. And it is becoming a feature of one of America's major political parties.

Yesterday, I detailed a number of laws pushed by Republicans in State legislatures to limit the amount of time that Americans have to vote, to frustrate election administration in urban areas and around college campuses, to impose overly burdensome ID requirements, absurd witness and signature requirements for absentee ballots. Maybe the most pernicious of all, Republicans in Georgia have coalesced around a plan to end all early voting on Sundays, a day when Black churches organize voter drives, with no good reason—again, none.

The threat to voting rights in America is now very real. It must be opposed in every State house and Governor's mansion in this country.

And the threat extends all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States. Eight years ago, a conservative 5-to-4 majority on the Court gutted the Voting Rights Act by essentially rendering meaningless section 5 of the statute, a provision which prevented the implementation of undue voting restrictions in a State with a history of discrimination.

Chief Justice Roberts suggested that the era of widespread discrimination, which led to the enactment of the Voting Rights Act, was over, and there was no longer a need for the critical portions of the statute. Well, within 24 hours after the ruling had been handed down, Texas announced it would implement a strict voter ID law, and soon thereafter, Mississippi and Alabama followed with laws that had previously been barred by the Justice Department.

Republican leaders in the State of North Carolina passed a suite of voter suppression laws that a Federal judge found targeted African-American voters “with . . . surgical precision.” Think about that. This was not a ruling from the Reconstruction Era or Jim Crow. It was only a few years ago.

At a time when an African-American man elected by the most diverse coalition in the history of American politics occupied the White House, Republicans in North Carolina passed voting laws so pernicious that even the Roberts Court—among the most conservative we have seen on this issue of voting rights—could not ignore the overwhelming stench of discrimination. That is what it was—a stench rooted in

America's sordid history of voter suppression and discrimination against Black voters.

Well, today the Supreme Court will hear another case concerning the Voting Rights Act, this time about section 2, a section which Chief Justice Roberts referred to in the Shelby County ruling as a necessary failsafe to police discriminatory voting procedures nationwide.

As one news outlet reported this morning, “there is every possibility that the high court could make it more difficult, or practically impossible, to challenge voting restrictions in the future,” warning that another ruling against the law could render the Voting Rights Act “a dead letter.”

That is what is at stake in America right now. As State legislatures move to restrict voting rights from one end of the country to the other, the law we rely on to prevent outright discrimination at the ballot box is at risk of being “a dead letter.” This is one of the most appalling things I have seen in this country after 4 years of an appalling administration. This is just incredible. It burns my blood and should burn the blood of every fair-minded American—Republican, Democrat, Independent, liberal, conservative.

After centuries of expanding the right to vote, of struggling to get that right to vote, these pernicious, self-serving proposed laws cut back on the right to vote. Will the Supreme Court let that happen? It is so against what America is all about.

We cannot stand by and do nothing as these rights are diluted or stripped away. Congress must pursue a restoration of the Voting Rights Act, and by all accounts should be working in a bipartisan way to make it easier, safer, and more convenient for all Americans to vote. The judgment of history has never been kind to those who work against the full participation of their fellow citizens in our democratic experiment.

I yield the floor.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican leader is recognized.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, there has been a lot of discussion about the Democrats' decision to load up their partisan spending bill with liberal items that are completely unrelated to the pandemic.

We are at a key turning point in this crisis. The Nation has just endured a historically painful year. This virus has stolen half a million American lives. It has thrown millions of children out of classrooms and workers out of jobs.

But on every front there seem to be signs we are actually turning the tide.